

When God Doesn't Make Sense

Psalm 73

Pastor John Miller

No doubt like me, you have wondered many times, "God, what are you doing? God, where are you? God, what's going on?" You know He's up there, you know He's on the throne and you know He's in control, but you sure don't see what His purpose or plan is. It would be kind of nice if He consulted me; I'd tell Him what He could do, how to work things out and what should happen. But God doesn't do that.

If you are one of those who are wondering what God is doing and He doesn't seem to make sense, you are in good company. Some of the great men and women of the Bible wrestled with this very thing.

I think of Job, who lost everything he had in one day. The only thing God left with Job was his loving, supportive, helpful wife. She said, "Honey, you should just curse God and die right now! I just thought I'd encourage you." Job learned that "The Lord gave, and the Lord has taken away." But He also said, "Blessed be the name of the Lord." Job learned to walk by faith and not by sight through this time when he couldn't see what God was doing.

Then there is Jeremiah, who is called "the weeping prophet." He wrote the book of Lamentations. He preached his entire life and never saw one convert.

I often thought about that: could I be a Jeremiah and preach my whole life through and never get a convert, never see someone come to Christ, never see any fruit?

Jeremiah was thrown into a pit, seemingly abandoned by God, but he was faithful to what God had called him to do.

Warren Wiersbe, one of my favorite men of God, who has gone to heaven, said he had this little figurine of Jeremiah on his desk to remind him to be faithful to what God has called him to do, even if he doesn't see any results.

I think of the prophet Habakkuk. He was a man who saw everything going down the tubes; all the nation was being destroyed. He asked, "God, why would you use a wicked nation to judge us? We're a righteous nation." God didn't really answer him, so he said, "I'm just going to go up into my tower, keep my eyes on God and walk by faith and not by sight." Then he wrote that famous statement: "The just shall live by faith." So we need to learn not to look at the world, but to look at God by faith and not by sight.

And this is what happened to Asaph in Psalm 73. The poet Asaph, the writer of the psalm, was a chief musician of David. David had other worship leaders, and Asaph was one of them. He wrote this psalm, as well as many other psalms.

Asaph wondered why the wicked prosper and the righteous suffer. That is one of the greatest questions of all time. “Why do bad things happen to good people?” or “Why do good things happen to bad people?” He struggled with these questions. He said, “My feet had almost stumbled; my steps had nearly slipped,” when he had begun to be “envious” and “saw the prosperity of the wicked.”

In his struggle, in Psalm 73, when Asaph couldn’t make sense of God, he recounted his experience by looking in four directions. I’ve always enjoyed breaking up this psalm by seeing Asaph’s look in four directions. In verses 1-3, Asaph looked back. In the first three verses, he gives a summary in retrospect; he tells us what he discovered after his trial was over.

Asaph said, “Truly God is good to Israel, to such as are pure in heart. But as for me, my feet had almost stumbled; my steps had nearly slipped. For I was envious of the boastful, when I saw the prosperity of the wicked.”

I want you to note the twofold conclusion that Asaph came to through his trial: number one, God exists or God is real; and number two, God is good. Whatever you go through or whatever you pass through, those are two foundational truths you can always hang onto: there is a God in heaven, and God is good all the time. So Asaph opens with this conclusion in verse 1: “Truly God is good to Israel, to such as are pure in heart.”

It was only because Asaph believed in God that he had this struggle. If there is no God, there is no issue. It is only because we believe in a God, and we know that God is love, that we can’t reconcile why bad things happen to good people. If there is a God, why doesn’t He protect us? Why doesn’t He take care of us? Why do these things happen? We forget that God is infinite and we are finite; that God knows all things and is outside time, that He has a perfect plan and we need to trust Him. He is bigger than we are.

The idea that bad things happen to “good people”—I don’t know what constitutes “good people”—and that good things happen to bad people doesn’t really affect us if we don’t believe that there is a God. It’s only because we believe in God that we wrestle with the idea of the goodness of God, in light of what we see in the world around us.

Asaph was not an atheist. It’s funny because atheists use this as an argument. They say, “I don’t believe in God, because bad things happen to good people.” Well, if there is no God, then it’s just happenstance; there is no one controlling anything, and thus, there is no issue. They just defeated their own argument; there is no real issue there. If there is no God, there is no ultimate authority, no fixed point or no right and wrong. You can’t say that something is right or wrong if there is no higher authority or court to appeal to. If there is no God, it’s all happenstance; it just happens. We’re all biologically just evolving; what is, is. There is no purpose or reason.

So Asaph believed that there is a God, and the important point in verse 1 is that God is good. In the Hebrew, which the Old Testament was originally written in, verse 1 would read, “Only

God is good, always good.” The emphasis is “only God.” It’s what is called “emphatic” in Hebrew. The emphasis is “God and God alone.” When the English Bible says “truly,” it means “only.” So only God is good, and only God is good always. It’s a very powerful, strong statement in the Hebrew.

Then notice his confession, which follows in verses 2-3. “But as for me...”—he is telling us what happened to him—“...my feet had almost stumbled; my steps had nearly slipped. For I was envious of the boastful, when I saw the prosperity of the wicked.” So he got his eyes off God.

We’re always going to be in trouble when we get our eyes off God. When we start to look at our checkbook or our bank account, when we start looking at our problems or when we look at ourselves in the mirror too long, we’re going to get depressed. But when we look at Jesus, we’ll be blessed. Sometimes you just have to turn the news off. I don’t want to hear any bad news; I want to focus on God and that God is in control.

So Asaph said that he almost slipped, because he became envious of the foolish when he saw the prosperity of the wicked. He uses the words “foolish” or “boastful” and “wicked” for the ungodly or the unbeliever. So Asaph began to look around him. Asaph had an honest doubt, but he almost slipped because of it.

It’s a dangerous thing when we begin to envy the man of the world, when we begin to envy his wealth, his health, his popularity and his fame and all the glamor and glitz that goes with his worldliness.

In our troubled times today, I think that some people are about to slip. Some people are about to stumble and fall. “Where is God in all this craziness that is going on?” they’re asking.

V. Raymond Edman once made the statement, “Never doubt in the dark what God told you in the light.” It’s a fancy way of saying that no matter what is going on around you, hang on to God’s promises. Hang on to God’s Word. It is “a lamp to my feet and a light to my path.”

The second direction that he looked was in verses 4-12; Asaph looked around. This is the heart of the story. When he looked around, it seemed to him that the wicked man was doing good, but the righteous man was suffering. So Asaph almost stumbled and almost fell, because he was looking around and became envious of the good things that the wicked seemingly had and he saw the trouble that the righteous were passing through.

Starting with verse 4, “For there are no pangs in their death, but their strength is firm. They are not in trouble as other men, nor are they plagued like other men.” Asaph is looking at them, and he basically says they have perfect health; they never have to go to the hospital, they never suffer, they never have pain, they never have issues. They work out, they’re buff, they’re healthy and strong, they eat health food, eat granola and drink smoothies. They’re in perfect shape. But you think, I go to church, I read my Bible, I pray, I exercise, but my body is falling apart! God, what’s going on?!

So the first thing he was envious of was their health. They seemed to be immune from disease. The Living Bible translates verse 4 as, "They seemed to live such painless lives."

Then in verse 5, they seemed immune from disaster. "They are not in trouble as other men, nor are they plagued like other men."

This is a lie from the devil. Satan comes to lie and deceive you. He says, "Look how good they have it! Look at their neighbors. They don't go to church, they don't read the Bible, they're not Christians, but their grass is greener than yours. They don't get weeds in their yard. Their kids are perfectly spaced; yours are just spaced out. Look how they get along with each other, while the Christians are struggling in their marriages."

But these are lies from the enemy. The nonbelievers do have troubles, but they don't show it. They don't want it to be seen. Sometimes the wicked can be falling apart, but they put on a façade. "Look how great I have it! Look at how good things are." They don't want anyone to know that they have a need of God in their life.

In verses 6-9, Asaph saw their pride. He uses a word picture to show how they flaunt their wealth. "Therefore pride serves as their necklace; violence covers them like a garment. Their eyes bulge with abundance; they have more than heart could wish. They scoff and speak wickedly concerning oppression; they speak loftily. They set their mouth against the heavens..."—that means that they blaspheme God—"...and their tongue walks through the earth."

This is a poetic, graphic description of their pride. They are proud and violent. The Living Bible, in verse 7, says, "These fat cats have everything their hearts could ever wish for." Their eyes stand out with fatness; they're corrupt. In their speech, they speak oppressively; they speak loftily. They even blaspheme God, they mock God and they put God down. They are proud.

What does man have to be proud of? You say, "Well, I work hard and made a lot of money." You couldn't breathe if God hadn't given you the ability to breathe. You couldn't move if God hadn't given you the ability to move your arm, to speak and to see. If you can see, thank God. If you can hear, thank God. If you can talk, thank God. If you can eat food, thank God. On and on the list goes. We have nothing, in and of ourselves, to be proud of. He is the one who gives us life and breath and all things. "In Him we live and move and have our being." It all comes from God.

The wicked also had their prosperity in worldly things, and Asaph was envious of that. This is sometimes a common struggle for the believer; they look at the nonbeliever and see their material prosperity. They wonder, Does it do any good to be a Christian?

Verses 10-12 say, "Therefore his people return here, and waters of a full cup are drained by them." Basically, it brings confusion and anguish to believers to see them prosper like this. "And they say, 'How does God know? And is there knowledge in the Most High?' Behold, these are the ungodly, who are always at ease; they increase in riches." The King James

version of verse 12 says, "Behold, these are the ungodly, who prosper in the world."

Notice where their prosperity is: "in the world." They're not rich toward God, but they're rich in this world. The Bible says, "Woe unto the person who is not rich toward God." Spiritual riches are far more valuable than material riches.

In verse 11, they say that "God doesn't see and God doesn't know. God doesn't understand what's happening. God doesn't intervene. He doesn't judge me." So they prosper in the world.

The tenth Commandment says, "You shall not covet." That's what Asaph was doing; he was coveting their wealth. He saw the glamor, glitz and glory that they had, so he said that it doesn't pay to be a Christian.

It's a sad day in the church when it has adapted this kind of worldly mindset: that godliness leads to wealth and earthly prosperity.

You can be walking with God in true holiness and obedience to His Word and still suffer. Godliness is no guarantee of immunity from trials, trouble, suffering and difficulty. God never promised that you would be problem-free. As a matter of fact, Jesus said, "In this world you will have tribulation...." Why is it that we never put that on any little promise cards? We don't like that one. But it's a promise. He said, "...but be of good cheer, for I have overcome the world." In Christ, we overcome the world, as well.

But if we look around and are envious of the wicked, sometimes we get discouraged and say that it doesn't do any good to be a Christian.

My car breaks all the time. If you see a car broken down on the highway, it's going to have a Christian bumper sticker on it. Christian cars break down. But heathen cars don't break down. Now we know that isn't true, but Satan pushes the problem right up against our face where we can't see any other solution.

The third direction he looked, in verses 13-16, is that Asaph looked within. I want you to note all these personal pronouns: "I," "my" and "me." This is painful. He was looking inside his own heart. "Surely I have cleansed my heart in vain, and washed my hands in innocence. For all day long I have been plagued, and chastened every morning. If I had said, 'I will speak thus,' behold, I would have been untrue to the generation of Your children. When I thought how to understand this, it was too painful for me." Asaph got his eyes off God, he got his eyes on the wicked and their prosperity and then he got his eyes on his own inner pain.

Introspection can be good if we do that in repentance toward God. But if we're doing that, in just looking at our own problems, hurts and what we don't have going for ourselves, it becomes dangerous. So we need to be careful not to focus on self.

As a result, Asaph came to the wrong conclusion, in verses 13-14, so he had a painful conflict, in verses 15-16. He comes to the wrong conclusion: it doesn't do any good to be a righteous

man. We say, "Why do I go to church? Why do I read my Bible? Why do I pray? Why do I live for the Lord? Why do I give to God's kingdom? It doesn't do any good; God hasn't given to me what I wanted." Sometimes it doesn't make sense what God is doing.

When Job went through his trial he said, "The Lord gave, and the Lord has taken away; blessed be the name of the Lord." He said, "Though He slay me, yet will I trust Him." So we need to learn that God hasn't promised that everything will be good in this world, but God will be with us.

Asaph came to the wrong conclusion, but he was being real. He could have piously pretended that he was living victoriously, but that would have led to hypocrisy. This is what a lot of Christians do when they are suffering. They put on a show. "I'm okay. Everything's cool." But they don't really learn to share their burdens with others and pray one for another, so they can be healed, restored and back to health. If you are struggling, find someone to pray with you, find someone to talk to, find someone to help bear your burdens.

The fourth direction that he looked, in verses 17-24, is that Asaph looked up. What do you do when God doesn't make sense? When you don't understand why God has allowed certain things to happen? You go to church, verse 17. He said, "...until I went into the sanctuary of God; then..."—in other words, "not until I went back to church"—"...I understood their end. Surely You set them in slippery places..."—speaking of the wicked—"...You cast them down to destruction. Oh, how they are brought to desolation, as in a moment! They are utterly consumed with terrors." These are the people he was envious of; they are headed for "destruction," "desolation" and "terrors." Verse 20, "As a dream when one awakes, so, Lord, when You awake, You shall despise their image."

There is no substitute for coming to God's house with God's people to hear God's Word. Asaph was going through all this turmoil and strife and was beginning to wonder what God was doing. But then he went to church. He looked up and saw God, and that gave Asaph a new perspective. Coming to church brings blessings.

Kyle Yates said, "So much depends on the worship of God in the sanctuary. The psalmist might have gone on for many months without ever finding the solution to his problem, had he failed to enter the sanctuary. This poor man might have been miserable and a doubter and a scoffer, a man without God, unless some touch of the Spirit had prompted him to enter God's house." I like that. There is no substitute for gathering together with God's people, hearing God's people worship the Lord, hearing God's Word and praying and encouraging one another.

The first thing Asaph saw when he went to church is that he saw the end of the wicked, verses 17-20. Sometimes I've thought that when we look at the wicked and envy them, it would be like a cow envying another cow that is being fattened for the slaughter. In the Bible you'll find reference to "the fatted calf." That is a calf that is being prepared for the barbeque. They would take one calf and separate it from the others, put it in a very green pasture and give it all kinds of food and take care of it. The other cows are probably thinking, That's not fair! Why does he get all the good grass?! Why is he so pampered?! That's not right! I want to go over there and

eat that grass! What a dummy cow! That cow is being prepared for the barbeque!

That's what it's like when the righteous envy the wicked: they're going to the barbeque. Why would you envy them? They're headed for destruction, as the Scriptures say. They will awake to the "terrors." What a sad and tragic thing that is.

When you look at the wicked, you need to remember their end. That should move us with compassion to pray for them and reach out to them and share the Gospel with them. We shouldn't envy them; we should pity them and preach to them and reach out to them, because they're going to hell.

There are only one of two roads for all of humanity to go down. You're either on the road to destruction, which is wide, or you're on the road to eternal life or heaven, which is narrow. You either go through the broad gate, where many are going down to destruction, or you're going through the narrow gate, where few are going to eternal life. All of humanity is on one of these two roads. There are no other roads or options; you're either going to heaven or you're going to hell. You're either saved or lost. You're either headed toward destruction or headed toward your home in heaven, eternal life. There are only two paths. Jesus said, "I am the way, the truth and the life. No one comes to the Father except through Me."

So, number one, Asaph saw the end of the wicked. In Luke 16, Jesus told the parable of the rich man and Lazarus, illustrating the way of the wicked. There was a rich man, who faired sumptuously every day. He would have been on the TV show Lifestyles of the Rich and Famous. He would have had a multi-million-dollar house in LA. You would have said, "Wow! I want to live there!" There would be 32 bedrooms in his house. How do you sleep in 32 bedrooms? You don't need a house that big. One bedroom with one bed is enough.

The story also had a poor man. He was outside the gate of the rich man's mansion begging for crumbs.

I've always thought that if I stopped right there in the story, which of the two men would you rather be? The rich man, of course. "I want to be the rich guy! Look at all he's got! Who wants to be the beggar?!" But then the story goes on.

Then the rich man died and went to hell. Now he didn't go to hell because he was rich; he went to hell because he was lost.

Then the beggar died and he went to paradise or heaven.

So now which man would you rather be? "I changed my mine; I'd rather be the poor man. I'll be the beggar."

So you see that we need an eternal perspective. We get so narrow in our perspective that we only see the temporal, the mundane, the physical and not the eternal.

Number two, Asaph saw his own foolish heart, verses 21-22. "Thus my heart was grieved, and I was vexed in my mind. I was so foolish and ignorant; I was like a beast before You." So Asaph was sorry that he even thought like he had. He had a foolish heart.

Verses 23-24 are my favorite verses of my favorite psalm. Asaph saw God's goodness, mercy and grace. He came to understand this because he went to church. "Nevertheless I am continually with You; You hold me by my right hand. You will guide me with Your counsel, and afterward receive me to glory."

Isn't that amazing? A few verses earlier, he was envious of the wicked and almost stumbled. Then he went to church, looked up and saw God, saw the end of the wicked, saw his own sinful heart and then realized how good God has been and the blessings that have come into his life.

I want you to note the blessings. In verse 23, he had God's presence. And so do you. "I am continually with You." Secondly, he had God's power. "You hold me by my right hand." Thirdly, he had God's providential care. Verse 24, "You will guide me with Your counsel." And fourthly, he had God's promise. "...and afterward receive me to glory." He will take him to heaven.

These blessings or promises are ours in Christ as believers. These are the blessings that money can't buy. All the money in the world can't buy you these blessings. But if you know Jesus Christ, you have them.

Let me go back over them again. "Thou art with me." "I am continually with you." If you are a Christian, God is always with you. David said, "Yea, though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death...You are with me." Whenever you're in the dark, whenever you don't sense His presence, whenever you don't have His peace, God is still with you. "The just shall live by faith." Not by feelings, not by emotions, not by sight, but by faith. Jesus said, "I will never leave you nor forsake you." He is Emmanuel, God with us. So we have that promise that He is with us.

Secondly, verse 23, "You hold me by my right hand." Isn't that awesome? I get thrilled whenever I get to hold my granddaughter's hand. As a Dad I loved it when my kids were young and I held their hand and could feel that little hand in mine. They trusted me. So now, one of the rewards of being a grandfather is that I get to reach down and hold my grandchildren's hands. I just love that. What a blessing.

Think of God's love for you. You're His child. Just think about the fact that God just reaches down and takes your hand, and you don't need to be afraid. He's promised to protect you and provide for you and take care of you. So He is with you and holding you. You have His support and His strength. The Holy Spirit is the "paraclete" or "the comforter"; He comes to lift us up.

The third blessing is God's providence, verse 24. "You will guide me with Your counsel." Someone pointed out that this involves his present—"I am continually with You"; his past—"You hold me by my right hand"; and his future—"You will guide me with Your counsel, and afterward receive me to glory."

I look back over my life and realize God's goodness has led me all my life. God gave me the parents I had, He gave me the family I have, He gave me the experiences I had. He guided me and directed me and took care of me. It's a miracle that I'm alive right now; I think of some of the things I did as a 16-year old in my Dad's car. I should have wound up dead; it was crazy. I think, You are so good, God, to save me, watch over me, take care of me and guide me!

And then the icing on the cake is verse 24. Asaph said, "Afterward..."—when I come to the end of my life, you will—"...receive me to glory." It's another way of saying, "All this, and heaven, too!" Isn't that good? So he saw in the sanctuary God's goodness and God's mercy.

Last night, when I was putting this sermon together, I got a phone call from a family from my former church. Before I came to Revival, they had moved to Utah. They are dear friends; I've known them for over 35 years. The husband of the family was dying; they said he wasn't going to live more than a few hours. I was asked to call them and pray with them. So I called Teresa, the wife, and I talked to Don. He could barely speak. They said, "Pastor Miller, you're our pastor. You've always been our pastor. We love you. We watch you every Sunday from Utah." And he said, "I'm going to see Jesus in just a few hours!"

I said, "I know, Don." And we wept and we prayed together. Then I went back to my study, and the psalm said, "Afterward receive me to glory."

When you come to the end of your life, all that matters is Jesus. All that Don wanted to talk about was Jesus. "I'm going to see Jesus in just a few hours!" He was actually excited; he was going home.

We need to remember to have an eternal perspective. This world is not our home; we're just passing through. Every one of us will come to that place. The Bible says, "It is appointed for men to die once." At that time, all we'll need is Jesus. So don't be envious of the wicked, the foolish. Get your eyes focused on Jesus.

The Bible tells us that Moses chose "rather to suffer affliction with the people of God than to enjoy the passing pleasures of sin, esteeming the reproach of Christ greater riches than the treasures in Egypt." Moses was the Prince of Egypt. He was second to Pharaoh. He stood ready to inherit all of that power and all of that glory. But he said, "No; I'm going to follow God." He forsook it all, because He had an eternal perspective. How important that is.

The summary of this psalm is in verses 25-28. Asaph basically summarized all that he had experienced. He came to the conclusion that "Whom have I in heaven but You? And there is none upon earth that I desire besides You. My flesh and my heart fail..."—amen to that—"...but God is the strength of my heart and my portion forever. For indeed, those who are far from You shall perish; You have destroyed all those who desert You for harlotry." If you turn away from God, you commit spiritual adultery. In summary, he says, "But it is good for me to draw near to God; I have put my trust in the Lord God, that I may declare all Your works."

So Asaph opens the psalm in verse 2 by saying that he "almost stumbled." He got his eyes off

God, he wasn't going to church, he forgot God's goodness, he looked at the prosperity of the wicked and began to envy them. Then by the end of the psalm, in verse 28, he said, "It is good for me to draw near to God; I have put my trust in the Lord God, that I may declare all [His] works."

What happened between verse 2 and verse 28? Asaph went to church. He went into the sanctuary and got his eyes back on God. Then he realized that it was good for him "to draw near to God." He put his trust in God and declared His works.

Notice that his circumstances didn't change. But what changed was his heart. Asaph changed. That's what God is trying to do; He's trying to change our hearts. He wants to work on us.

In conclusion, I want to give you three application points. Number one, God's Word is true, no matter what we see. Walk by faith, not by sight. That could be the whole wrap up of this psalm. Number two, spend time worshiping God in God's house with God's people. Don't isolate yourself from the fellowship of the saints. Number three, keep an eternal perspective.

Amen.